

## Deuteronomy 17:14-20

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When you enter the land which the LORD your God gives you [as a fulfillment of promise], and you possess it and live in it, and you say, ‘I will set a king [מֶלֶךְ *melek*] over me like all the nations who are around me [which God expected and permitted; see Gen 17:6],’<sup>15</sup> you shall surely set a king over you whom the LORD your God chooses [Yahweh is their God-King; see [Psa 44:4](#); [74:12](#); [Isa 33:22](#); [43:15](#)], one from among your countrymen you shall set as king over yourselves; you may not put a foreigner over yourselves who is not your countryman.<sup>16</sup> “Moreover, he shall not multiply horses for himself [to build his army], nor shall he cause the people to return to Egypt to multiply horses, since the LORD has said to you, ‘You shall never again return that way.’<sup>17</sup> “He shall not multiply wives for himself [no political marriages], or else his heart will turn away; nor shall he greatly increase silver and gold for himself [to build up his treasury].<sup>18</sup> “Now it shall come about when he sits on the throne of his kingdom [as the Lord’s viceregent], he shall write for himself a copy of this law [the book of Deuteronomy] on a scroll in the presence of the Levitical priests.<sup>19</sup> “It shall be with him and he shall read it all the days of his life [carry and read his Bible], that he may learn to fear the LORD his God, by carefully observing all the words of this law and these statutes [which provide objective revelation of God and His will so that the king can rule effectively],<sup>20</sup> that his heart may not be lifted up above his countrymen [thinking he’s better than them] and that he may not turn aside from the commandment, to the right or the left [so as to deviate from God’s Word], so that he and his sons may continue long in his kingdom in the midst of Israel [if the king followed this command, both he and his children would be blessed].

### Summary

This unit of Scripture is part of a larger section in which Moses addresses four leadership offices God would assign in Israel, namely, **judges** (Deut 16:18-17:8), **priests** (Deut 17:9-13; 18:1-8), **kings** (Deut 17:14-20), and **prophets** (Deut 18:15-22). These four leadership offices were bound by the Mosaic Law, which legitimized their authority and was the guide for their rulership. In this pericope, Moses addresses Israel’s future request for a king (Deut 17:14-15), and then specifies the requirements of that king that he may serve as the Lord’s viceregent (Deut 17:16-20).

God knew subsequent generations of Israelites would desire a king after they’d entered the land of Canaan and He was favorable to the notion, albeit with restrictions. Moses wrote, “When you enter the land which the LORD your God gives you, and you possess it and live in it, and you say, ‘I will set a king over me like all the nations who are around me’” (Deut 17:14). Being omniscient (Psa 139:1-4), God knew Israel would possess the land of Canaan, a land which He owned and controlled (cf. Lev 25:23; cf., Psa 24:1;

89:11). He also knew the Israelites would, in time, desire and request a human king to rule over them. The word *king* translates the Hebrew word מֶלֶךְ *melek*, which was used of Israel's leaders from 1050 to 586 B.C. Having a king was not a problem, for God had promised Abraham—the progenitor of Israel—that he would be the father of many nations, saying, “kings will come forth from you” (Gen 17:6; cf. Gen 17:16; 35:11). Later, God had narrowed the kingly line to the tribe of Judah, saying, “The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until Shiloh comes, and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples” (Gen 49:10). The problem was that Israel would desire a king in order to be “like all the nations” around them. God wanted His people to be separate, distinct, and unlike the nations of the world. He said, “I am the LORD your God, who has separated you from the peoples” (Lev 20:24b). He called them to be “a holy nation” (Ex 19:6). Daniel Block notes, “In contrast to the offices of judge (Deut 16:18–20; 17:9), priest (Deut 17:9; 18:1–8), and prophet (Deut 18:9–22), the office of king is presented as optional, subject to the desire of the people.”<sup>1</sup>

God would grant Israel's desire to have a king, but He set guidelines for the king, guidelines that would complement the nation's operations and not hinder it from being holy. Moses said, “you shall surely set a king over you whom the LORD your God chooses, one from among your countrymen you shall set as king over yourselves; you may not put a foreigner over yourselves who is not your countryman” (Deut 17:15). God would be the One to select their king, and He did via His prophet, as was the case when Samuel anointed Saul (1 Sam 9:15-16; 15:1), and later David (1 Sam 16:1-3, 12-13). Warren Wiersbe writes:

The king was not to be elected by the people; he was to be chosen by God. Israel's first king was Saul (1 Sam 9–10), but God never intended Saul to establish a royal dynasty in Israel. Saul was from the tribe of Benjamin, but Judah was the royal tribe (Gen 49:8–10), and the Messiah would come from Judah. Actually, Saul was given to the people to chasten them because they rejected the Lord (1 Sam 8:7), for God's greatest judgment is to give His people what they want and let them suffer for it.<sup>2</sup>

God knew His people well, and He knew they would be tempted to live in conformity to the pagan values of the world around them. In order to keep His people distinct from other nations, and to keep them looking to Him as their God-King, He placed prohibitions on the kings of Israel. These prohibitions included: 1) multiplying horses to strengthen the

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel I. Block, *The NIV Application Commentary: Deuteronomy*, ed. Terry Muck (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 418.

<sup>2</sup> Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Equipped*, “Be” Commentary Series (Colorado Springs, CO: Chariot Victor Pub., 1999), 118.

army, 2) multiplying wives for pleasure and political alliances, and, 3) greatly increasing silver and gold for financial security.

Starting with the development of the king's army, God said, "Moreover, he shall not multiply horses for himself, nor shall he cause the people to return to Egypt to multiply horses, since the LORD has said to you, 'You shall never again return that way'" (Deut 17:16). Horses were used in military battles and pulled chariots, which were the tanks of the day. God wanted the king to look to his Lord for deliverance and not rely on military might like the pagan nations did. Egypt was a major source of horses, and God forbid His people from returning to the place where they'd been delivered from captivity.

Addressing the king's marital life, God decreed, "He shall not multiply wives for himself, or else his heart will turn away" (Deut 17:17a). Pagan kings in the ancient world multiplied wives as a means of securing political alliances with neighboring nations and also for sexual pleasure, which was the purpose of the concubine. Human relationships either help or hinder a believer's walk with God, and there was no closer relationship a king could have than with his wife. God knew if Israel's kings married women with pagan values and practices, it would only be a matter of time before they turned his heart away from Him. Wives played key roles in the lives of Israel's kings, either for good (Prov 31:10-12) or bad (1 Ki 21:25; 2 Ki 8:16-18).<sup>3</sup>

And concerning the king's treasury, God said, "nor shall he greatly increase silver and gold for himself" (Deut 17:17b). Having wealth is essential to the economic development of a person and nation, and there was nothing wrong with the king having wealth. This prohibition pertained to the pursuit of wealth by human means, which would prove to be a consuming passion that would turn his heart away from the Lord. David said of God, "Both riches and honor come from You, and You rule over all, and in Your hand is power and might; and it lies in Your hand to make great and to strengthen everyone" (1 Ch 29:12). God may bless His servant with riches; however, David also said, "If riches increase, do not set your heart upon them" (Psa 62:10b). Money was necessary for living, but was also unstable and could easily be lost. The rule was, "Do not weary yourself to gain wealth, cease from your consideration of it. When you set your eyes on it, it is gone. For wealth certainly makes itself wings like an eagle that flies toward the heavens" (Prov 23:4-5; cf., Prov 27:24). The Lord Jesus said, "Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed; for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions" (Luke 12:15). Wisdom is found in the one with a temperate heart (Prov 30:7-9), who is content with what the Lord provides (1 Tim 6:8), is concerned with storing up

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<sup>3</sup> Mothers have been influencers as well, either for good (Prov 31:1) or bad (2 Chron 22:2-3). There is merit to the statement, *the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world.*

wealth in heaven (Matt 6:19-21), pursues a life of righteousness (Matt 6:33), and if blessed with wealth, uses it for godly purposes (1 Tim 6:17-19). Daniel Block states:

These prohibitions, then, address three major temptations facing ancient rulers: lust for power, lust for status, and lust for wealth. The text does not prohibit the purchase of horses, or marriage, or the accumulation of some silver and gold. The threefold repetition of “for himself” emphasizes the ban concerning the king’s exploitation of his office for personal gain.<sup>4</sup>

How was the king to know God’s will for himself? He was to know it by reading the book of Deuteronomy, which enriched his thinking and guided his actions. In fact, God required the king to handwrite a copy of the book of Deuteronomy, saying, “Now it shall come about when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself a copy of this law on a scroll in the presence of the Levitical priests” (Deut 17:18). The king did not make laws, but received them from God, who was Israel’s divine King (Psa 44:4; 74:12; Isa 43:15), as well as their Legislator and Judge (Isa 33:22). God’s laws were inscripturated and could be studied and applied by the king, or any who desired to know God and live His will (Deut 6:1-3; Ezra 7:10; Neh 8:1-3; Mal 2:7). Writing out a personal copy of the law in the presence of the Levitical priests signified this as a sacred act. It’s possible the Levitical priests, being present, would ensure the copy was wholly accurate. And the king was to carry it with him and read it all the days of his life as a manual for righteous living before his holy God. All of this assumes the integrity of language, in which the author’s original meaning was permanently infused in the words and phrases he wrote, and that language itself served as a reliable vehicle for communication. The end result was that the reader was responsible to know what had been communicated and would be blessed or disciplined based on whether they responded to it positively or negatively. Here, the integrity and authority of the written commands was to be honored by the king who subordinated himself to his God-King.

After hand writing a copy of the Law, the king was required to keep its content flowing in the stream of his consciousness at all times. This meant he was to carry the Scriptures with him all the time and read it daily. God said, “It shall be with him and he shall read it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the LORD his God, by carefully observing all the words of this law and these statutes” (Deut 17:19). Again, the integrity of language is assumed as subsequent kings would have an objective standard by which to guide their thinking and actions.

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<sup>4</sup> Daniel I. Block, *The NIV Application Commentary: Deuteronomy*, ed. Terry Muck (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 419.

The daily reading of God’s Word was also intended to help keep the king humble, “that his heart may not be lifted up above his countrymen and that he may not turn aside from the commandment, to the right or the left, so that he and his sons may continue long in his kingdom in the midst of Israel” (Deut 17:20). The king, like all Israel, was under God’s ultimate authority. But being the king also meant he was to serve as a spiritual leader to God’s people, and this meant he was held to a higher standard, for if the king turned “aside from the commandment, to the right or the left” it meant leading others into sin. But if the king was obedient, both he and his sons would know God’s blessing and the Lord would ensure their continuation in the land. Without question, the most important qualification for the king was to know God’s Word and walk in it. Failure at this point would result in a prideful ruler who would, by default, be governed by the inclinations of his sinful heart and the values and practices of a fallen world that is governed by Satan and his forces.

The king who followed these directives would serve as the ideal Israelite, not relying on self or resources, but be wholly devoted to God and guided by sacred Scripture. Later, when Samuel was leading Israel, the people came to him with their concerns and asked for a king that they might be “like all the nations” around them (1 Sam 8:4-5). This displeased Samuel greatly (1 Sam 8:6). However, when he prayed about the matter, God told Samuel, “Listen to the voice of the people in regard to all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me from being king over them” (1 Sam 8:7). The Lord also said, “Like all the deeds which they have done since the day that I brought them up from Egypt even to this day—in that they have forsaken Me and served other gods—so they are doing to you also” (1 Sam 8:8). Samuel warned them about the ways of “the king who would reign over them” and the abuses that would follow (1 Sam 8:9-18). Even with the warning of tyranny and abuses, the people requested a king (1 Sam 8:19-20), and God gave them the desires of their heart by selecting Saul, a Benjamite (1 Sam 9:1-2), who did all the harm God had warned them about.

Saul started out well, but in a short time He became disobedient to the Lord. Samuel said to Saul, “You have acted foolishly; you have not kept the commandment of the LORD your God, which He commanded you” (1 Sam 13:13a). As a consequence, God told Saul, “Now your kingdom shall not endure” (1 Sam 13:14a). Samuel informed Saul about the reason he lost his kingship, saying, “because you have not kept what the LORD commanded you” (1 Sam 13:14c). Samuel also informed Saul about his replacement, saying, “The LORD has sought out for Himself a man after His own heart, and the LORD has appointed him as ruler over His people” (1 Sa 13:14b). God selected David as Saul’s replacement, and David was “a man loyal to Him” (1 Sam 13:14 CSB). Throughout his life, David sought the Lord and studied His Word (Psa 1:1-2; 25:4-5), walked with God and taught others to do the same, saying, “I will teach transgressors Your ways, and sinners will be converted to You” (Psa 51:13). David was a writer who composed 73 Psalms which instructed others in righteousness and led them in worship. And when

David sinned, he handled his failures in a biblical manner by confession (Psa 32:3-5), and owning the consequences (1 Chron 21:13). Israel's kings were sometimes compared with David (1 Ki 15:1-5; 2 Ki 16:2; 18:1-3; 22:1-2; 23:3). David also instructed his son, Solomon, to know God's Word and to walk in it (1 Ki 2:1-3). Though Solomon knew God's directives for kingship, he broke all three commands as he accumulated horses from Egypt (1 Ki 4:26-28; 10:26-28), wealth by oppression (1 Ki 10:14-25; 12:4), and hundreds of wives and concubines (1 Ki 3:1; 11:1-8). Solomon had great wisdom, but he failed to apply what he knew. All believers have this capacity, which is why James said, "to one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin" (Jam 4:17). Being a good leader is always about learning God's Word and doing God's will, staying humble, staying faithful, and selflessly seeking the best interests of others.

It is true that David practiced the sin of polygamy contrary to the Law of Moses. From Scripture we know the names of eight of David's wives: Michal (1 Sam 18:27), Abigail (1 Sam 25:39-42), Ahinoam (1 Sam 25:43), Bathsheba (2 Sam 12:24), Maacah, Haggith, Abital and Eglah (2 Sam 3:2-5). He had other wives and concubines that are not named, as Scripture reveals, "David took more concubines and wives from Jerusalem, after he came from Hebron" (2 Sam 5:13a). Interestingly, the Bible says nothing negative about David's practice of polygamy, and though it was a sin according to Scripture, it was apparently tolerated in David's life, perhaps because it never resulted in his wives leading him into idolatry as it did with his son, Solomon (see 1 Kings 11:1-11).<sup>5</sup>

In summary, the Mosaic Law placed limitations on the role of the king because of the tendency of those in power to become corrupt, because the proclivity of the human heart is bent toward self-interest rather than God's interests. However, if the king in Israel learned God's Word and followed His directives, stayed humble and faithful, he and the nation would know ongoing blessing.

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<sup>5</sup> Biblically, some acts of obedience are more important than others, and some acts of sin are more egregious than others. For example, Samuel, told Saul, "Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice" (1 Sam 15:22). Solomon wrote, "To do righteousness and justice is desired by the LORD more than sacrifice" (Pro 21:3). Jesus told the scribes and Pharisees, "you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness" (Matt 23:23). Likewise, some sins are worse than others and bring greater judgment. Jesus told His disciples not to be like the Scribes, "who devour widows' houses, and for appearance's sake offer long prayers", saying, "These will receive greater condemnation" (Luke 20:47). Concerning the citizens of Chorazin and Bethsaida, Jesus said, "it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment than for you" (Matt 11:22). The apostle John, writing to believers, states, "All unrighteousness is sin" (1 John 5:17a). However, he drew a distinction, saying, "there is a sin that results in death" (1 John 5:16b), and "there is a sin that does not result in death" (1 John 5:17b). These are obvious statements that show some acts of obedience are better than others, and some acts of sin are worse than others.